DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 286 192 CS 210 795

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TITLE	Dealing with Feelings [and] A District-Wide Writing Assessment.
INSTITUTION	North Dakota Univ., Grand Forks. Center for Teaching and Learning.
PUB DATE	Oct 87
NOTE	11p.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT	Insights into Open Education; v20 n2 Oct 1987
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Creative Writing; Educational Assessment; Elementary Education; Elementary School Students; Expressive Language; Kindergarten Children; Letters (Correspondence); *Psychological Needs; Student Attitudes; *Student Needs; Teacher Role; Theory Practice Relationship; *Writing Evaluation; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

Intended for teachers who want to improve writing instruction in their kindergarten or elementary school classroom, this two-part guide offers ideas for kindergarten teachers to help their students express their feelings through writing and reports on a district-wide writing assessment in Grand Forks, North Dakota. The first part, which is divided into three sub-sections, offers ways kindergarten teachers can help students deal with their feelings of pain or abandonment through the writing or dictating of letters, discussion of problems, and the reading of stories about children's problems. The second part of the guide focuses on a 13-month assessment of sixth grade students' writing. Included is information about the development of definitions of good elementary school writing, the identification of district goals, the evaluation of criteria, and attendance at writing workshops. (JC)

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ED286192

CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA
GRAND FORKS 58202

Volume 20, Number 2
October 1987

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Dealing With Feelings

by

Irmie Fallon

A District-Wide Writing Assessment

by

Mike Johnson

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INSIGHTS into open education

Dealing With Feelings

By Irmie Fallon
Manhattan, KS

Many children who are experiencing some kind of disruption in their lives carry that disruption into the classroom. As teachers, we may not be able to change children's lives outside of school, but we can help them deal with their feelings. Children who can orally verbalize or write about their feelings also do not feel the need to lash out physically. In addition, being able to express feelings is a skill children will need throughout their entire lives.

It takes time to help children learn to express their feelings. Often children find it difficult to express the emotions they are having. This article describes how I use writing, discussion, and response to literature to help children express their feelings in the classroom.

Dealing With Feelings Through Writing

It all started when Crystal's grandmother got sick. Her mother went to North Carolina for a week's visit which stretched into a month when her grandfather also got sick. It was difficult for Crystal to be starting kindergarten with her mother 1,000 miles away and her father away in the army all day.

One day she asked if I would help her write a letter to her mommy. She dictated:

Crystal to Mommy
Mommy, come home and see me.
See the way I write my name all by myself.
Mommy, take care of Grandma.
Mommy, take care of Grandpa.
I say my prayers at night.
I got my coat lost.
I write a story for you.

I placed the letter in an envelope for her to take home. The next day I asked if Daddy had mailed it. She said, "Yes. He says Mommy will cry."

That was the first of many letters my kindergartners wrote this year to help them deal with feelings. Our writing program gives the children an opportunity to draw and write each day. The writing had been introduced to increase verbal skills of children, but I soon noticed that the writing was often therapeutic for them as well.

In December Christie used inventive spelling when she wrote to her father who lived in another state:

Dr DaDe
i love U.
i hoP U cm AFtr Christas
i wnt U N i hAvNt seN u N A lo N tiM
iM Bng god. i BN oN the tim ot chr oNle
l tiN thro Al the tiMe i BN N sKol.
Christie

Her mother told me later that her father had paid little attention to her, but after receiving her letter, he did come and get her for a few days after Christmas.

Amanda was also missing her Daddy. He was with the Army on maneuvers in California and missed

Thanksgiving with his family. Her letter indicated a child's effort to make sense out of adult methods of solving the world's problems:

DeR Daddy
I atL Dont uNDRetand that you had to Go to the DZRt.
We SAVD The trke 4 you AnD we cA HAV a Nic ThanKsguN dNr.
We Gt a Rel Christmze tRee
I mo you And i Am GlD tHat you R cNN HoM SM DAy.
Love Amanda

Nancy dictated a letter to her father in prison:

Dear Daddy,
I love you very much.
I want you to come home pretty soon because we want you home.
Love Nancy

When Mike's mother was in the hospital for surgery, his behavior regressed considerably. I knew he must be worried about his mother and suggested he write her a letter that she would get in the hospital. His whole attitude changed when he talked about how pleased and surprised Mommy would be to get a letter:

Der MOM
i LOV U SO MASh!
WE hd AtR toda!
AND WE d d ShAPS
LOV MICHAEL
XXX KSS

Children everywhere are experiencing more stress and disruption in their lives because of moving. In my class near a military reservation, I normally have 40-50 enrollment changes each year. Being able to write letters to friends who have left eases the pain of separation. When Mindy left for Germany, Ryann wrote:

Dear Mindy,
I hop i KD vet U at Jermne and I wi hav fN
Kn I C yr rom?
Love Ryann

Janet was dealing with her grandfather's death when she wrote:

Grnma
I M vRE Sd that mi GrndPa did.
Mi Fmle ynt 2 ha funrl.
Janet

As she wrote her letter, Janet said, "People tell me not to talk about Grandpa because it makes Grandma sad. But I think about him anyway." I assured her that Grandma thought about him, too, and that it made her happy to know that Janet remembered him, and that we <u>are</u> sad when we lose someone we love.

Last year the children repeatedly drew pictures of space ships after the Challenger accident, and I was thankful that they were used to writing about their feelings. Christopher's picture added a more personal perspective. His own mother had deserted her four children the month before. His picture showed not only the space ship with the "space lady" inside but he also included her son sitting on the ground watching his mother leave.

<u>Dealing With Feelings Through Discussion</u>

In my first meetings with parents (Kindergarten Round-up and Back-to-School Night) I explain that while children may be allowed to hit back at home, when they are at school they will be encouraged to talk about their anger. When two children have a dispute, I isolate them and ask them to talk about their problem with <u>each</u> other and stay until they both feel good about

the solution. Without an audience to observe them, children usually quickly settle the problem and remain friends.

Each day we spend a few minutes in Sharing Time. Usually the children talk about new shoes or an anticipated trip to Show Biz Pizza, but it is also an opportunity to share more serious thoughts. Children need to feel that nothing is too terrible to talk about with a caring teacher. In a supportive atmosphere children find it easier to reveal fears and anxieties and find support from others who care about them.

Shelly chose Sharing Time to say, "My Daddy left last night and he's going away and I'll never see him again!" as she ran sobbing across the room and flung herself in my arms. It was a time for all of us to talk about how sad we are when someone we love moves away, and to reassure her that it wasn't her fault.

Increasingly, I have come to believe that the primary feeling behind children's anger is almost always fear--often fear of physical hurt or fear of abandonment. Recently David shared that he and his step-father had had a serious fight. I asked the other children for ideas to help David. Most of the children suggested that he apologize or try not to make his step-father angry. Aaron suggested, "He could get a knife and stab himself." The other children laughed nervously, but I decided to take him seriously and asked, "Have you ever thought of that, Aaron?" He said yes--he was often afraid of his own daddy. David wasn't laughing either so I asked if he ever thought of hurting himself. He said, "Yes. Grandpa Charlie is in the grave and I'd like to be with him." In the class we went on to talk of other ways to handle the problem, but later I contacted both mothers. I expected them to be reluctant to believe that five year olds were thinking of suicide, but each of them were aware of problems and willing to seek help and have the boys receive therapy.

Children need adults who deal honestly with them and their feelings. Several years ago I had a child with terminal cancer in my room. Not surprisingly, Ricky's chemotherapy affected his behavior. Holding him on my lap seemed to calm him. Even though the children knew he was sick, I knew it must be difficult for them to understand why behavior that would have been unacceptable from them resulted in Ricky's being held on my lap. One day when he was absent I explained that he was very sick and that his medicine made him feel crabby. I suggested that they must feel that sometimes I loved him more than them. Brandy said, "We know you love him, but we love him, too." Ricky and his family went to stay with his grandparents at Christmas and several months later we received the letter telling of his death. I shared the news with the children, telling them that sometimes doctors cannot make us well, and even little children sometimes (but not often) die, too. We talked of Ricky and remembered the happy times and then Kevin finished the conversation with, "We all have to die sometimes. Everybody. Even you." and then he added, "Everybody, except God."

There are times when we need to ask other professionals to help children deal with feelings. To help prevent sexual abuse we have worked with the Victims Assistance Counselor from the local police department. She comes to the primary classrooms at least once each year to talk to the children about "good

touch" and "bad touch." Children are encouraged to trust their own feelings and decide whether they want to be touched. It starts with very basic choices. One day during story time Danny complained that Denise had kissed him. I reminded him that he could decide if he wanted to be kissed and if he didn't want to he should tell Denise. He turned to her and said, "I don't want you to kiss me." Amy promptly asked, "Can I kiss you?" and Danny, beaming, said, "Yes!"

School psychologists and social workers are also available to help us with children who have special problems and need more help than we are able to give in the classroom.

Dealing With Feelings Through Literature

A third way to deal with feelings is through literature. Books can give relief from pain, and bring joy and beauty into our lives.

Reading and listening to good literature help children realize they are not alone in their feelings. As we share books we often talk about the author and illustrator. Together we wonder, "Did Tomie de Paola have a beloved grandparent live with him when he was a little boy?" Several of his books deal with that theme.

Each year there are more books available about divorce, latch key children, death, and other special problems. Books help children verbalize feelings and reaffirm that feelings are acceptable.

Following is a partial list of books (K-2) which help children understand and deal with feelings:

Relationships with Parents:

Marge Blaine, The Terrible Thing That Happened at Our House, Parents Magazine Press, 1975.

Caroline Feller Bauer, My Mom Travels a Lot, Warne, 1981.

Lucille Clifton, Amifika, E. P. Dutton, 1977. (A little boy worries that his father returning from the army won't remember him)

Joan Fassler, All Alone With Daddy, Behavioral Publications.

Charlotte Herman, My Mother Didn't Kiss Me Goodnight.

Barbara S. Hazen, Even if I Did Something Awful, Atheneum, 1981.

Patricia Perry, Mommy and Daddy are Divorced, Dial, 1978.

Muriel Stanek, All Alone After School, Whitman and Co., 1985.

Relationships with Peers:

Judy Delton, The New Girl at School, Dutton, 1979.

Russell Hoban, Best Friends for Frances, Harper and Row, 1969.

Mildred Kantrowitz, I Wonder if Herbie's Home Yet, Parents Magazine Press, 1971.

Judith Vigna, Anyhow I'm Glad I Tried, Albert Whitman and Co., 1978.

Taro Yashima, Crow Boy, Viking Press, 1955.

Relationships with Siblings:

Martha Alexander, When the New Baby Comes, I'm Moving Out, Dial, 1979.

Judy Blume, The Pain and the Great One, Bradbury Press, 1984.

Elaine Edelman, I Love my Baby Sister (Most of the Time), Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1984.

Russell Hoban, A Baby Sister for Frances, Harper and Row, 1964.

Steven Kellogg, Much Bigger Than Martin, Dial, 1976.

Judith Viorst, I'll Fix Anthony, Harper and Row, 1969.

Grandparents:

Tomie de Paola, Now One Foot, Now the Other, Putnam, 1981. (Grandfather has a stroke)

Tomie de Paola, Nana Upstairs, Nana Downstairs, Puffin Co., 1973.

Eloise Greenfield, Grandmama's Joy, Philomel, 1980. (Living with Grandma and financial problems)

Bill Martin, Jr., Knots on a Counting Rope. (An Indian grandfather explains growing old)

Judith Vigna, Grandma Without Me, Albert Whitman, 1984. (Divorce and grandparents)

Death:

Leo Buscaglia, The Fall of Freddie the Leaf, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982.

Edith Stull, My Turtle Died Today, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964.

Judith Viorst, The Tenth Good Thing About Barney, Atheneum, 1975.

Joan Fassler, My Grandpa Died Today, Behavioral Publishers.

Moving:

Penelope Jones, I'm Not Moving, Bradbury Press, 1980.

Janet Schulman, The Big Hello, Greenwillow, 1976.

Exceptional Children:

Joan Fassler, The Boy With a Problem, Behavioral Publishers.

Joan Fassler, One Little Girl, Behavioral Publishers.

Phyllis Gold, Please Don't Say Hello, Behavioral Publishers.

Joe Lasker, He's My Brother, Albert Whitman, 1974.

Edna Levine, Lisa and Her Soundless World, Behavioral Publishers.

Others:

Tomie de Paola, Oliver Button is a Sissy, Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1979. (Oliver wants to dance)

Dick Gackenback, Harry and the Terrible Whatzit, Clarion Books, 1977. (Monsters)

Patricia MacLachlan, Mama One, Mamma Two, Harper and Row, 1982. (Foster Care/Mental Illness)

Tricia Tusa, Libby's New Glasses, Holiday House, 1984.

Valentina Wasson, The Chosen Baby, Lippincott, 1977. (Adoption)

Charlotte Zolotow, William's Doll, Harper and Row, 1972. (Grandma buys William a doll)

Irmie Fallon has taught kindergarten at Ogden Elementary School (Manhattan-Ogden District) in Kansas for seventeen years. She and her husband sponsor the local Parents Anonymous Chapter, an organization designed to help abusive parents.

A District-Wide Writing Assessment

By Mike Johnson
Grand Forks, ND

Grand Forks completed a 13-month assessment of sixth grade writing in July of 1986. A committee of five sixth grade classroom teachers, our district reading consultant, an advisor from the University of North Dakota's Center for Teaching and Learning, and myself met 24 afternoons during the year. Grade six was selected for the "locally" developed assessment. The feeling was that we would be able to assess those skills our children had developed in their K-6 experience. Although our major concern was assessment, the committee quickly found that in order to "assess" writing we had to first determine what writing was, the functions of writing with which elementary children were most involved, the classroom conditions under which good writing most easily occurred, and the role which the teacher had in facilitating the writing development of children. Writing workshops were begun in each of our committee members' classrooms.

Our committee had unique opportunities to develop background for the assessment. We attended a two-day workshop with Lucy Calkins, author of **Lessons from a Child**, met with Pat Carini, who spoke on "voice" in children's writing and attended a Donald Graves and Frank Smith writing conference. (Graves is the author of **Writing, Teachers and Children at Work**.)

We identified seven goals as we began the study:

1. Discuss writing and develop a committee definition of writing. (What is writing?)

2. Identify positive aspects of our current program, as well as areas we need to strengthen. (How do we teach writing?)

3. Gain a general understanding of our students' progress in writing at this point in their development. (How do the students from the classroom of the committee teachers write?)

4. Plan a writing assessment for sixth graders. (How can we best assess all sixth grade writers?)

5. Assess the students and analyze the results. (How well do sixth graders in the Grand Forks School System write?)

6. Make recommendations for improving the writing process throughout the elementary school. (What can we do to improve writing in our elementary schools?)

7. Share with our fellow staff members the information about writing that we discovered.

We began by listing qualities of good writing and by analyzing a variety of pieces of sixth grade writing. Many questions arose, such as:

1. How do you assess creative writing as compared to factual writing or personal narratives?

2. Should a prompt (story starter) be used for students?

3. Should there be a limit on the length of a piece?

4. Should students have an opportunity to brainstorm, proofread, revise, and rewrite?

The answers to these questions influenced our decisions about how to conduct the actual assessment. Through discussion and observations about our own students' writing, we decided that a narrative, personal or fictional, could be assessed with the same criteria. We also decided that the student narrative should be written in school but without a teacher prompt. We felt strongly that in our own classrooms our students produced their best writing when the topic was self-selected. We also strongly felt that any prewriting activity, such as brainstorming, produced better writing. Therefore, we wanted to give students this opportunity on the assessment. In addition, we felt that students wrote best when they were given opportunities to draft and edit their texts. For this reason we also decided to allow students time to work through several drafts if they so desired.

For several months we worked on refining the criteria we would use to assess student writing. The four qualities of writing we intended to use for assessing the students' writing samples were:

1. The piece conveys a clear message.

2. The piece has a logical sequence.

3. The piece is free of errors (both grammatical and compositional).

4. The piece has voice or style.

It was felt that a 1, 2, 3, 4 scale would be most effective. The four-point scale created more discussion and a better assessment of the pieces. As the committee rated various pieces of student writing, each point (1, 2, 3, 4) for the different criteria was defined. It was very important to be able to distinguish among a 1, 2, 3 and 4 for logical sequence, for example.

As the week of March 21 arrived, 525 pieces had been sent to Wilder School for assessment. All papers were distributed into four piles so that classrooms and schools were divided. Papers were then numbered 1 to 525. During the assessment, our committee worked in partners or in groups of three. Each paper was read by at least two teachers, assessed and discussed. The consensually agreed upon rating was recorded on a Writing Assessment Rating Sheet. We found that our many hours of discussion proved valuable. Our assessments did coincide with our partner. When we differed, we talked and either came to a compromise or asked for a third party to help. We assessed four afternoons (approximately 10 hours) and found that 2 or 2½ hours were the maximum we could stay on task.

The following is a summary of our findings. Of the 525 papers submitted to the committee, 467 met the guidelines that were sent to sixth grade teachers. The majority of papers that were not assessed were eliminated because they were longer than the two page limit. At the conclusion of the assessment, percentages were calculated for each area--clear message, local sequence, mechanics, and voice/style. Grand Forks students scored high in developing a clear message in their piece. Two areas of concern were noted. Our students scored well above the national norm on ITBS testing in the area of mechanics but the locally developed assessment proved otherwise. The majority of our students fell down in this area. The area of voice also proved to be a concern although not as serious as mechanics.

The committee has recently completed writing workshops in each of the 12 elementary schools. We shared the results of the assessment as well as the "writing workshop" approach used in the classrooms of the committee members. We invited discussion on ways to best develop young writers but one fact remains. To become better writers, children need to write.

Mike Johnson is Principal at Wilder Elementary School in the Grand Forks Public Schools and was chair of the Reading Assessment Committee for the district.